

## **Dr. Harka Gurung-The Pre-eminent Geographer: Some Reminiscences**

*Mangal Siddhi Manandhar, Ph.D.*  
msm\_mangal@hotmail.com

### **First Encounter**

I first came to know Dr. Harka Gurung when he visited the Department of Geography at Trichandra College. When I was studying in the second year of college. Dr. Harka Gurung had completed B.A. from Patna University, India, and was on his way to Britain for further study. He was at the Department to prepare some maps using tracing table. It was in 1961.

I was never formally introduced to Dr. Gurung as it is not our custom to do so. None of us in the class could dare to go talk to him and get information about his study abroad. We kept mum but used indirect ways to get information.

We, in the class, came to know that Dr. Gurung had completed his B.A. from Patna University at the top of his class-First Class First. We also came across a magazine published by Nepali students of Patna University. There was a colored photograph of a painting done by Dr. Gurung. I still remember vividly the beautiful painting of tastefully arranged football boots and socks.

Next time I saw Dr. Gurung was some six years later, most probably in 1966. It was in the Dasarath National Stadium, Kathmandu, playing football from a renowned club of Kathmandu. He was playing in centre-half position a position of play maker. He was a very good player. I do not recall whether Dr. Gurung's team won or lost that match. Dr. Gurung, then, had completed his study from University of Edinburgh, UK, and was teaching in the Tribhuvan University at the Department of Geography. I had already completed my M.A. in 1964. So I did not get the opportunity to sit in his class.

I still had not been formally introduced to Dr. Gurung. But we the students of geography are all aware of his brilliant academic career.

In 1966, I got the Fulbright Scholarship Grant to study in the USA. So, it was not until I came back in 1973 finishing my study that our paths were to cross again.

## 1973 Onwards

By the time I came back from the USA, Dr. Gurung had already emerged as the prominent planner/geographer of Nepal. He already had worked as Member of NPC, 1968-72 and was working as Vice-Chairman of NPC, 1972-75. He also contributed as the Minister of State for Education, Industry and Commerce, 1975-1977.

During his tenure in NPC and in the Ministry, a great deal of importance was given to maps, charts and diagrams in presenting development related information. To my knowledge, during his tenure as the Vice-Chairman of NPC and later as the Minister, maps, charts and diagrams were made mandatory during formal presentation in the government. The importance of geography as an academic discipline was highlighted in a way that it was never done before and has never been done since then.

Until Dr. Gurung introduced regional planning, Nepali geographer's well known contribution was in the division of Nepal into 14 zones and 75 administrative districts. The introduction of regional planning in Nepal opened up new opportunity to solve development problem of Nepal. According to this spatial strategy four development regions with growth axis and growth centres were planned. By "inducing" development in selected growth centres, it was assumed that the 'spread' effects will take place in the region along various channels. Four development regions later were divided into five.

The introduction of regions certainly helped in the process of deconcentration and decentralization in Nepal. The credit for introducing this spatial strategy of development in Nepal goes entirely to Dr. Gurung. It is unfortunate that regional planning could not proceed to logical end as visualized by the initiator and left only in the form of physical frame devoid of the processes required for its success. Had the regional planning process moved forward as visualized by Dr. Gurung the history of the armed conflict and the present demand for federal structure certainly would have been different.

## Interaction Programs

There was an interaction program held at Hotel Soaltee regarding urbanization of Nepal. Dr. Harka Gurung was the main speaker. I made a comment regarding the criteria for deciding a settlement as urban. I expressed my dissatisfaction about the criteria which took only the size of population as the basis without giving any consideration to density and the occupational characteristics. But while expressing my opinion I happened to say that there was no basis for defining an incorporated urban area. Political decision was made the sole basis for decision. Because of this, many incorporated urban areas remained only in names. Dr. Gurung responded with a smile saying of course there were criteria for defining an urban area for instance number of population. He responded in such a style that people in

the program had a hearty laugh. Another event down the memory lane was attending a seminar where Dr. Gurung was one of the paper presenters. It was held at Hotel Annapurna and it was during the reign of King Birendra around mid-1980s. I do not remember the title but it was about national integration. Dr. Gurung's presentation was very impressive. He was basically presenting the problems of national integration in the light of upper caste Hill-Brahmin/Chhetre domination of state apparatus and state's pursuit of one religion and one language policy. The sound of 'Trident' and 'Conch' as pronounced by Dr. Gurung referring to domination of Hindu religion symbolically, still rings in my ears.

## **Reorganization of Districts in Nepal**

Not long ago, it was probably 2003, Dr. Gurung came out with the idea of reorganization of districts. Even during the Panchayat era I had heard that Dr. Gurung had proposed 40 districts. The Panchayat politicians fearing the loss of their seats in the Panchayat objected to it and the proposal was stalled. This time Dr. Gurung came out with the proposal of 25 districts and established the reorganization of districts a key feature of the national agenda. The contemporary demand for restructuring the state into a federal structure has made Dr. Gurung's proposal more relevant.

## **Working with Dr. Gurung**

I got a chance to work with Dr. Gurung in 1989. In fact, it was Dr. Gurung who called me to work as a principle researcher on a small World Bank project in New Era. The topic of the project was 'Effects of Policy and Program on Renewable Resource Use: A Comparative Study of Nuwakot and Lamjung'. I felt quite nice working with him, I benefited both academically and financially as well.

## **Politics**

Dr. Gurung, once dabbled in the Panchayat politics of early 1980s. He became the candidate for Panchayat (then parliament) from Lamjung district, his birth place. I still remember the blue-print map showing his campaign schedule pasted on the wall of his study room. The map showed the date and the time of his campaign trail. The election meetings generally are not held in time and run extra-ordinarily late. The way Dr. Gurung's election campaign was planned left hardly any room for it to succeed. The only way to stick to the time frame as planned would be to trek passing through election campaign venues meeting hardly any people. If the candidate was to meet people and make speeches, a lot more time had to be given than planned in the map. Obviously keeping up with the campaign schedule would mean ineffective campaign but would be a good trekking trip. I heard Dr. Gurung tried to stick to his planned campaign schedule.

When I was in Dr. Gurung's office again I had visited Lamjung after the election in the course of the World Bank project which I was doing with Dr. Gurung. I commented looking at the map that I know why Dr. Gurung lost the election. Of course, Dr. Gurung became curious and wanted to know the reasons. I told him that the campaign schedule as shown in the map was absolutely impractical and the campaign slogan printed all over in his constituency rhymed badly. The slogan in Nepali went like this: "Harka Gurung, Lamjung Pharka" (Harka Gurung, Return to Lamjung). The slogan could have been written as "Gurung Harka, Lamjung Pharka" which would have made it rhyme well. Dr. Gurung, of course, had a laugh. Then we started to talk about the project we were doing together. But he had the quality of laughing at his own mistakes.

### **National Identity**

In 1996, I had the good opportunity to lead the Nepali delegation to Bangkok in ESCAP meeting. There, I met Dr. Gurung who had also come to attend the meeting. Before the delivery of my speech Dr. Gurung asked me worried whether I had pure Britisher accent. I was not quite sure what kind of accent I had, but because I had spent several years in the USA, I replied that I probably do not have an accent, other than what should be expected. But it certainly did not erase the worried look of Dr. Gurung. After the speech Dr. Gurung rushed forward and shook my hand happily and said 'Thik chha Thik Chha' (It's good it's good). It made me feel really good to see Dr. Gurung happy.

### **Contributions**

I probably am not aware of all the activities and contributions of multi-talented Dr. Gurung made to the nation, but I do know about his contribution in naming mountain peaks, promoting mountain tourism, publishing history of maps in Nepal and epoch-making migration research and its recommendations.

### **To Conclude**

There is no denying of the facts that there is a deep sense of loss among Nepali in general and geographers in particular in the untimely deaths of Dr. Gurung. Dr. Gurung will be always remembered as the pre-eminent geographer of Nepal nationally and internationally for ages to come.